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# The Howard Thurman Legacy

**AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY**

Let us now go forth to save the land of our birth from the plague that first drove us into the "will to quarantine" and to separate ourselves behind self-imposed walls. For this is why we were born: Men, all men belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself, and he who shuts another away from him destroys himself.

Howard Thurman

*The Search for Common Ground*

In 1953, President Harold C. Case named Howard Thurman as Dean of the Chapel at Boston University. This was the first appointment of a black person to a deanship in a predominately white university anywhere in the United States. Thurman served the University until his retirement in 1965. At the time of his death, in 1981, he was Dean of the Chapel, Emeritus.

In 1984 his widow, Sue Bailey Thurman, gave Boston University the Howard Thurman Archive, comprising his papers, five hundred original tapes of his lectures, sermons, and meditations, and also a cloth woven for him by Mahatma Gandhi. Mrs. Thurman noted that she was presenting the archive because her husband had accepted the deanship believing Boston University would make, in his words, "a limitless contribution to inter-group relations at this fateful moment in the history of America and the world"; and believing that, through young graduates who would be going "to the ends of the world to take up their responsibilities as members of communities... the widest possible dissemination of the ideas in which I

believe” could be realized. In making the presentation, Mrs. Thurman said:

The archive is given to Boston University because Howard Thurman chose to come here after following a dream of unity crossing all lines of race, creed, color, or national origin. This was the motive of his life from the beginning as a young man, as a student, and later as a faculty member of Morehouse College, his Alma Mater. Then his work carried through this dream at Howard University in Washington, D.C.; then to San Francisco for the cofounding of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples; and finally to Boston — the town-gown community of Boston University. When he arrived here he had learned many very fine lessons and it was these lessons which he offered to this community which, I think, was his ultimate legacy. Here he wrote ten of the twenty-three books of which he was author. This will be a place where scholars will come for research and study and to carry on in this field as we multiply all those who share in this particular dream and motive of dreaming.

Students and scholars at Boston University and from institutions around the country come to Special Collections at Mugar Memorial Library, where



*Sue Bailey Thurman signs the deed of gift to Boston University of the Howard Thurman Archive, 1984. From the left: Howard Gottlieb, Director of Special Collections, Mugar Memorial Library; William Harvey, University General Counsel; George K. Makechmie, Dean Emeritus, Sargent College of Allied Health Professions; and Edwin Penn, Executive Vice President.*

the archive is housed. Librarians there report that the Howard Thurman Archive is among the most active in Special Collections.

John H. Cartwright, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Professor of Social Ethics at Boston University, uses the Thurman archive in counseling, in directing dissertations,

and in teaching. On alternate years, he offers a course specifically on the life and thought of Howard Thurman.

Praising his predecessor for appointing Howard Thurman, Boston University President John Silber declared in 1983 that

it was a courageous, controversial, and right decision of President Harold Case to appoint him. The fact that it was a controversial decision to appoint a black man as Dean of the Chapel of a predominately white university as recently as 1953 is yet another expression of the tragedy of racism in the United States. ... The gospel that Howard Thurman preached was so universal that it breaks all barriers of divisiveness and addresses us all whoever we are and from wherever we have come. ... The universality of the Thurman legacy is a proud part of the legacy of Boston University.

The universality of the Howard Thurman message became clear in the worship services at Marsh Chapel. Throughout Thurman's tenure at the University, the following statement appeared in the Sunday morning bulletin:

The Sunday morning worship service is so designed as to address itself to the deepest needs and aspirations of the human spirit. In so doing, it does not seek to undermine whatever may be the religious context which gives meaning and richness to your particular life, but rather to deepen the authentic lines along which your quest for spiritual reality has led you.



*Howard Thurman and Boston University President John Silber at the dedication of the Thurman Room in Marsh Chapel, 1978.*

The congregation consisted of students and faculty from Boston University and other universities and colleges in the area, members of the community-at-large, and visitors from all parts of the world with various religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds.

The congregation represented a wide range of social and economic strata as well. At Boston University, as in other institutions where he had

served, Howard Thurman gave strength and succor to the great, the humble, and the disinherited.

The universality of the Howard Thurman message is also apparent in his writings. *Deep Is the Hunger* (1951), *Meditations of the Heart* (1953), and *The Inward Journey* (1961) are books consisting of short pieces that address the “deepest needs and aspirations of the human



Howard Thurman in the kitchen—cornbread, his specialty, will soon be on the table.

spirit.” They speak to the issues of the individual in times of laughter, success, and fulfillment, and in times of tears, failure, and disappointment. Howard himself frequently met his own need by reading a selection in *The Inward Journey* as if he were not the author.

When in 1970 he completed the manuscript for *The Search for Common Ground*, he declared, “I was struck by the feeling that here I had set down the case in rather formal terms, for what reveals itself is my lifelong working paper.” He had dealt with the “paradox of conscious life” and found it to be the “ultimate” issue:

On the one hand is the absolute necessity for the declaration that states unequivocally the uniqueness of the private life, the actual sense of being an isolate, independent and alone, the great urgency to savor one’s personal flavor—to stand over against the rest of life in contained isolation. While on the other hand is the necessity to feel oneself as a primary part of all life, sharing at every level of awareness a dependence upon the same elements in nature, caught up in the ceaseless rhythm

of living and dying with no final immunity against a common fate that finds and holds all living things.

In a sense, therefore, I have been writing this book all my life. Over and over again I have asked myself, "What is the common ground that floats the private adventure of the individual or solitary life?"

In his quest for common ground, Thurman concluded that, "in human society, the experience of community, or realized potential, is rooted in life itself because the intuitive human urge for community reflects a characteristic of all life." But he also knew that negative human impulses continually loom to block the way to community. In *The Search for Common Ground* he wrote:

The man who seeks community within his own spirit, who searches for it in his experiences with the literal facts of the external world, who makes this his formal intent as he seeks to bring order out of the chaos of his collective life, is not going against life but will be sustained and supported by life. And for the world of modern man this is crucial. In the conflicts between man and man, between group and group, between nation and nation, the loneliness of the seeker for community is sometimes unendurable. The radical tension between good



George Makechmie (right) presents a check for \$10,000 to Howard Thurman on his retirement, 1965. Sue Thurman and President Harold C. Case look on.

and evil, as man sees it and feels it, does not have the last word about the meaning of life and the nature of existence. There is a spirit in man and in the world working against the thing that destroys and lays waste. Always he must know that the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate, he must distinguish between failure and many-sided awareness so that he will not mistake conformity for harmony, uniformity for synthesis. He will know that for all men to be alike is the death of life in man, and yet perceive the harmony that transcends all diversities and in which diversity finds its richness and significance.

Howard Thurman came to a "profound conviction that meaningful and creative experiences between peoples can be more compelling than all the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide them; and absolute faith that if such experiences can be multiplied and sustained over a time interval of sufficient duration any barrier that separates one person from another can be undermined and eliminated."

His conviction developed from the evidence in his own experience during his long years of service to peoples of different cultural, religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds.

The vitality of the Howard Thurman legacy at Boston University reflects that conviction. Just as Thurman ministered throughout his lifetime to a wide variety of individuals, creative experiences at the University now join together students and others from many cultural, religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds. Participants are invited to bring the special gifts of their individual identities and create a harmony where "diversity finds its richness and significance."

In 1983 an informal Howard Thurman Fellowship was created. It presented Howard Thurman commemorative programs to the University and the community-at-large. The offerings, with a modest beginning, soon attracted a cross section of students and others.

In 1986 the Howard Thurman Center was established. It adopted the Fellowship, coordinating Thurman-related activities on the campus. In concert with the Office of the Vice President and Dean of Students, it offers a diverse range of services and resources, including:

- continuation of the Fellowship's commemorative events;
- seminar-type discussions in the Thurman Room at Marsh Chapel and in the Center director's office, where books, audio, and video equipment are available;
- conferences with individual students by the director;
- on- and off-campus intergroup experiences, sometimes for a weekend;
- outreach programs; in cooperation with chaplains at Norfolk State Prison for men (MCI-Norfolk) and Framingham State Prison for women (MCI-Framingham), the Center shares the Howard Thurman message with inmates. The Center has provided these institutions with books and audio and video equipment.



*Executive Committee, Associates in the Search for Common Ground, 1994: David Razon (left), Rachel Brasso, and Stanley Jacobs, Jr.*

Each fall a presentation on the Howard Thurman legacy and the work of the Howard Thurman Center is a part of the orientation program for the resident assistants on campus.

As working with students of diverse backgrounds had a central influence on Thurman's decision to accept the Boston University appointment, so students continue to be the central focus in the present-day work of the Center. They have come from Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Shinto traditions and from a variety of national backgrounds.

Alumni of the Center continue to bring the Thurman influence to bear in their lives and work. Some counsel young people of the inner city. A recent graduate established legal services in the inner-city section of a large metropolitan area. Still others, such as health professionals, carry the Thurman "ministry of pain" to patients.

In 1993, student leaders in the Howard Thurman Center proposed the creation of a student organization that would reflect the Howard Thurman legacy and deal with contemporary issues affecting intergroup relations. After extensive study and discussion, the name Associates in the Search for Common Ground was agreed upon, and the group is now an official stu-



*Sue Bailey Thurman with international students, 1962. Her collection of United Nations dolls is on the table at right.*

dent activity approved by the University's Student Activities Office. The officers are students, and the director of the Howard Thurman Center is the faculty advisor. The Howard Thurman Center and the Howard Thurman Archive serve as principal resources for the organization.

Continuing the tradition begun by the Fellowship, the Associates in the Search for Common Ground offered its first program open to students, faculty, and members-at-large of the Howard Thurman Center on November 18, 1993. A panel of three faculty members with a student moderator addressed the topic "Should our diverse American community be represented by a common language?" After the program there was an



informal fellowship. As a component of the Howard Thurman Center, Associates in the Search for Common Ground augurs well for the continuing influence of the Howard Thurman legacy at Boston University.

The work and influence of Sue Bailey Thurman, Howard's marital and professional partner, are important elements in the Thurman legacy. Howard described her contribution as a combination of "genius and vision." It was she who opened their home, where students could come individually and in small and large groups "for meals, for tea, or simply to visit." As her husband observed, "She has a rare gift for doing things that seem impromptu because of the ease with which they are done, but which come out of a well-integrated, well-disciplined sense of responsibility and caring for the many students we have served."

The International Students and Scholars Office, which today serves some four thousand students from 125 foreign countries, grew out of Sue Thurman's sense of responsibility and caring. Soon after the Thurmans arrived on campus, she was deeply moved by the suicide of a Japanese woman student who had left a note saying, "Even here I have no friends." True to her lifelong commitment "to attend to the stranger, and particularly the cultural stranger" far from home, Sue Thurman studied the situation at the University. She found that there was no structure within the University designed to care for the social and personal needs of students from abroad. Soon she organized an International Students Hostess Committee, which consisted of wives of faculty members and administrative officers. Members "adopted" students, inviting them to their homes and otherwise providing family-like experiences.

Today the Women's Guild conducts the hostess program, and the International Students and Scholars Office displays a plaque recognizing Sue Bailey Thurman as "a spiritual founder of services provided to international students."

On January 25, 1992, Boston University conferred an honorary degree on Mrs. Thurman at a special convocation. President Silber, reading from the degree citation, stated:

Partner and mentor of Howard Thurman, continuer of his tradition, you have devoted your life and formidable abilities to interracial, intercultural, and international understanding.

Across the country and the world you have helped young people of all races and nationalities to find personal fulfillment. . . .

Throughout your husband's ministry you supported and inspired him. At Morehouse College and Howard University, in San Francisco at the founding of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, you were at his side. At Boston University, your home continued to be an extension of your husband's ministry. You made it a place of refuge in times of need and sorrow, a place of celebration in times of joy and thanksgiving. . . .

You did not limit your concerns to the Boston University community. Immersing yourself in the history of black people in Boston, you founded the Museum of Afro American History and devised the Black Heritage Trail. Always a trailblazer, you provided guidance not only to tourists but to Bostonians ignorant of their own history, unlocking through understanding and instruction historical treasures that had always been there, but were too often overlooked. Through your work you have helped preserve, interpret, and disseminate a history of the struggles and achievements of African-Americans, which should be of the highest concern to Americans of all heritages. . . .

For a life spent in building bridges and knocking down barriers, for your diverse and intense service to the fellowship of all peoples, Boston University, proud that you are one of our own, confers upon you the degree Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*.

Sue Bailey Thurman's influence continues at Boston University. As honorary chairman of the Howard Thurman Center, she consults with the director regularly from her home in San Francisco.

The Howard Thurman legacy is a vital presence on the Boston University campus and its influence is being felt by a growing number of students. Thus the University comes increasingly closer to realizing the objective of President Silber, who has declared:

We shall do whatever we can and all that we can to be sure that it is not the *memory* of Howard Thurman that is honored

at Boston University, but the *living word and life* of Howard Thurman that become a part of the experience of every student in this institution.



*Charter members of the Associates in the Search for Common Ground, 1994. Clockwise from lower left: George Makechuie, George Tsitiniis, Rachel Brasso, Daniell Williams, David Razon, Reginald Jean, Suzanne Cort, Kia Glass, Kalama Lui-Kwan, Erica Perlmutter, and Brinda Shah.*

### **Books Written by Howard Thurman**

- ★ *Apostles of Sensitiveness.* Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1956.
- The Centering Moment.* New York: Harper & Row, 1969. Paperback ed., Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1972.
- Deep Is the Hunger.* New York: Harper & Row, 1951. Paperback ed., Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1978.
- Deep River: An Interpretation of Negro Spirituals.* Mills College, California: Eucalyptus Press, 1945.
- Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (single volume). Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1975.
- ★ *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals.* New York: Harper & Row, 1955. (Revised ed. of the 1945 publication, with illustrations by Elizabeth Orton Jones.)
- ★ *Disciplines of the Spirit.* New York: Harper & Row, 1963. Paperback ed., Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1973.
- ★ *Written during Thurman's tenure at Boston University.*

*The First Footprints — The Dawn of the Idea of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples: Letters Between Alfred Fisk and Howard Thurman, 1943–44* (editor). San Francisco: Lawton and Alfred Kennedy, 1975.

- \* *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples*. New York: Harper & Row, 1959.

*The Greatest of These*. Mills College, California: Eucalyptus Press, 1944.

- \* *The Growing Edge*. New York: Harper & Row, 1956. Paperback ed., Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1974.

- \* *The Inward Journey*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961. Paperback ed., Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1971.

*Jesus and the Disinherited*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949. Apex paperback ed., Abingdon Press, 1969. Reprint ed., Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1981.

- \* *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

*Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness*. Mills College, California: Eucalyptus Press, 1947.

- \* *Meditations of the Heart*. New York: Harper & Row, 1953. Paperback ed., Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1976.

*The Mood of Christmas*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

- \* *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*. Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 115, 1961.

*The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. New York: Harper & Row, 1947. Republished in 1975, in one volume with *Deep River* (q.v.).

*The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. Paperback ed., Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1986.

- \* *Temptations of Jesus: Five Sermons*. San Francisco: Lawton Kennedy, 1962.

*A Track to the Water's Edge: The Olive Schreiner Reader* (editor). New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

*With Head and Heart: An Autobiography*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979. Paperback ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

- \* *Written during Thurman's tenure at Boston University.*